

Land swap to provide buffer zone

Largest gamelands area in state will be created

BY AL WINN

Of Our Lebanon Bureau

FORT INDIANTOWN GAP • A land deal to protect hikers and hunters from accidental shelling would end up creating the largest gamelands area in the state.

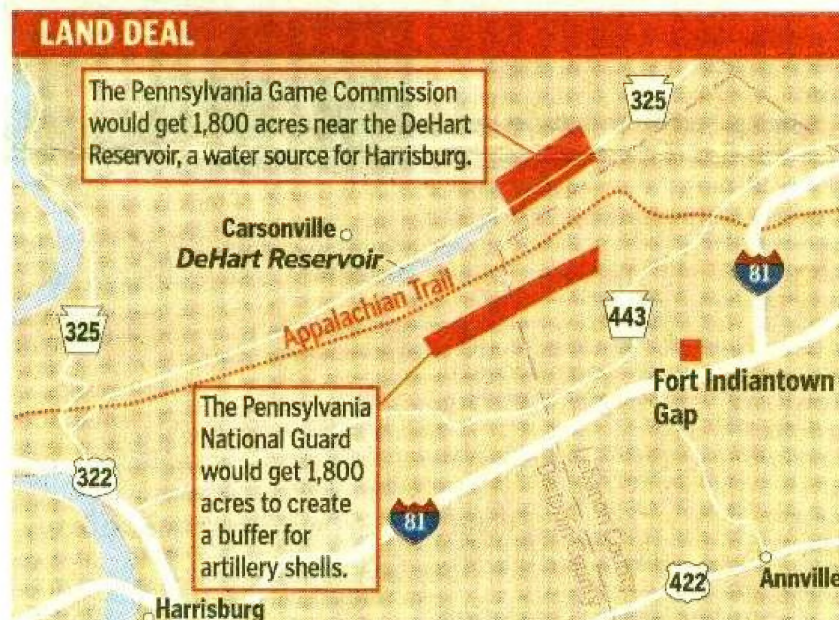
A proposed land swap, involving 3,600 acres in Lebanon and Dauphin counties, was initiated by the Pennsylvania National Guard and would involve the guard buying 1,800 acres near DeHart Reservoir from the Harrisburg Authority and turning it

over to the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

In return, the National Guard would receive 1,800 acres of gamelands just north of Fort Indiantown Gap to use as a buffer area between firing ranges south of Second Mountain and recreational areas north of it.

The DeHart property would provide a bridge between gamelands 211 and 210, which together, at 55,000 acres, would be the largest contiguous area in the state owned by

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DEREK WACHTER, The Patriot-News

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A public meeting on the proposed land swap will be held 6 to 8 p.m. May 20, at the Fort Indiantown Gap Community Club.

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the Game Commission, said commission spokesman Jerry Feaser.

The exact boundaries of the land the National Guard would buy from Harrisburg have not yet been determined, though city spokesman Randy King said it would be upstream from the reservoir and would not include any of the lake's shoreline. The authority owns 8,600 acres around the reservoir, which is a water source for Harrisburg.

The National Guard would pay Harrisburg "fair market value," for the land, said guard spokesman Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver. The land would be appraised before officials from the guard and city negotiate a price, he said.

The land the National Guard wants from the game commission is a strip about seven miles long on the north side of Second Mountain from Cold Spring Road on the east to a point near the East Hanover/Middle Paxton Twp. line on the west.

After shells were found to be ricocheting off Second Mountain into the gamelands in 1997, the National Guard realigned its firing ranges so that artillery and tanks would shoot parallel to the mountain rather than toward it.

But analysts determined there is still a risk of a shell ending up on the north side of the mountain, Cleaver said. No military training would be carried out in the newly acquired land the proposed deal would give the guard, Cleaver said.

The land the Guard is hoping to acquire would stop 50 meters short of Stony Creek and would not affect the rail-trail that runs the length of Gamelands 211. Hunting would still be allowed on the land, but hunters would have to go through a safety program before hunting there or on any other Gap land.

Recreational access to the gamelands should improve, Cleaver said. Many hikers, hunters and fishermen use Cold Spring Road to reach the ruins of what was once the resort village of Cold Spring.

"We're going to fix that road," Cleaver said. The National Guard would also provide parking areas at the top of Second Mountain, he said.

Hunting is already permitted on the land the game commission would get, Feaser said. What would change is the game commission "could conduct habitat management without worrying about ownership," he said.

King said the city expected the DeHart watershed would be protected as well under game commission ownership as it is now by the authority.

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